

THE COMBINATION OF SEWING TECHNIQUES,  
MANUFACTURED FABRIC, PAPER, PAINT,  
AS A CREATIVE PROCESS

PROBLEM IN LIEU OF THESIS

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Nostalgia, Americana, sewing, and textile art are all part of the world of contemporary art in the 70's. Several books have been written during this decade which have elevated the interest in the quilt of the nineteenth century as an art form to be seriously considered. There are many current artists working in ways which relate to this interest. Susan Hoffman and Molly Upton began making quilt paintings in 1972.<sup>1</sup> Eileen Reichek uses various fabrics and threads in her series of works.<sup>2</sup> Along with a renewed popularity of quilts, a renewed interest in the use of needlework to make art (especially by women) has occurred. Childhood memories of watching my grandmother and great-grandmother quilting make it important for me to carry on this tradition in a personal fashion with my own creative work.

I have used sewing techniques in my own paintings for the past four years. They began as abstract shapes of canvas sewn together and painted but remaining two-dimensional. I began to stuff some of the shapes, eventually creating

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<sup>1</sup>Wooster, Ann-Sargent, "Molly Upton and Susan Hoffman," Artforum, XIV (March, 1976), 67.

<sup>2</sup>Marter, Joan, "Elaine Reichek," Arts, LII (January, 1978), 7.

three-dimensional, stuffed, painted objects. Within the last year, I have returned to a rectangular format, keeping the canvas loose with hemmed edges and sewn and painted areas to activate the surface. I also began restricting the use of paint, relying on fabrics to provide the color in the pieces. Most recently, I have also incorporated sewing techniques in drawings which relate to the fabric pieces.

My problem was to investigate some of the possibilities which have arisen through my previous work by producing twelve fabric pieces and eight paper pieces. Specifically, the following questions were to be examined:

1. Are there traditional designs or techniques in quilts of the past that can be utilized in my own work?

2. Are the primary colors (red, yellow, blue) in manufactured unaltered fabric more effective than painted or altered fabric?

3. Is there a correlation between the color and imagery in the paper pieces and those of the fabric pieces?

4. Of the project pieces, is there a size that generally appears to be more successful than others?

Sources for the fabric and paper pieces were my own previous work, books on quilt and folk art, and magazine articles of currently related art. Whether directly or indirectly influencing this investigation, these sources were thoroughly examined for supportive imagery.

Throughout the investigation, a written journal was kept in which I recorded the process used for each piece--selection of elements, notes, and sketches. Slides were taken of each completed piece.

In the discussion of this project, several terms and types of media will be used. Quilting is a technique of joining three layers--a top layer, a middle layer of cotton or polyester batting, and a layer of backing--by the use of machine or hand-stitching. For most of the project pieces, a theme was chosen; that is, a central idea for the selection of imagery and formal elements. Many types of manufactured fabric were used. Satin, velvet, canvas, muslin, printed fabrics of various content, and miscellaneous remnants of a wide range of types are in the completed pieces. In some cases, the fabric was left unaltered. In others, fabric was altered by various painting techniques. All fabrics used were obtained at a local fabric shop or from a mail-order fabric remnant dealer. In the paper pieces, various types of paper were combined. Pastel paper was used as a background for additions of colored papers. Book papers of various printed designs, velour paper which has a soft velvet-like texture, and translucent tissue papers were incorporated into the pieces.

In addition to answering the specific questions during the investigation, it was hoped that a highly personal

approach and a significant degree of creativity would be evident in the work.

## CHAPTER II

### DISCUSSION

The time period involved for the completion of the studio portion of this investigation was from July, 1977, to December, 1977. As work progressed on the fabric pieces, they became increasingly complex and detailed. The time required for the completion of each piece was greater than originally anticipated, which necessitated a reduction in the original number of fabric pieces proposed from 20 to 12. It was also at this time that an addition of 8 paper pieces was introduced as part of the investigation.

The work for the fabric pieces in this project was approached in terms of a theme for each piece. A preliminary list of possible themes which interested me was made, the work began, and the following pieces are the results.

#### Last of Pompeii

Since childhood, the city of Pompeii fascinated me, and I visited it during a trip to Europe in 1974. For a long time, I had wanted to create a work of art which related my impressions of Pompeii and its history. This became quite a complex theme for my first piece in the investigation.

The book, Pompeii and Herculaneum, the Living Cities of the Dead, by Theodor Kraus was the main source of supportive



imagery, as well as personal photos taken during my visit. A photography in the Kraus book of a wall with areas of color provided the background structure for the piece. Fabrics were chosen, regardless of their type, to be used for various sizes of rectangles which were close to the colors in the photograph of the wall. These rectangles of fabric were arranged on a large plain square of canvas, size 56" x 56". To carry out the theme of Pompeii, the two large areas of muslin on the lower portion of the piece represent the volcano and its eruption over the city. Shapes of satin in symbolic colors were chosen and simply laid onto the fabric. When a final decision was made on the arrangement of the satin shapes, spray paint of red, orange, and gray were sprayed around some shapes for added color and effect. Finally, the shapes were machine-sewn to the larger pieces of muslin with threads of matching and contrasting colors, depending upon the effect desired. This same process was carried out on the other rectangular areas, each representing some aspect of Pompeii. The three rectangles above the lower sections show the escape to the sea, and a look back at crumbling archways and columns. The series of rectangles above this are representative of some of the relics that were left such as, amphoras, hollow bricks, and surgical tools. Finally, the upper portion shows the clouds above the city. After completing all of these individual rectangles, I felt that a background other than

canvas was needed to make the segments a total picture. Blue satin was chosen for the lower background and borders and gold satin for the upper portions.

### Matterhorn

The theme of this piece is quite simple compared to the previous one. It is a landscape, with a large pinnacle which recalled for me the Matterhorn in the Alps. This piece was an experiment to see if a smaller previous piece could be enlarged successfully. The original piece was 15" x 15", and it was enlarged to 38" x 40". Every effort was made to duplicate the colors in the original piece, even though different types of fabric had to be used for some shapes. The shapes were enlarged to assume a similar relationship as in the smaller piece. As in the original piece, after the shapes were chosen and cut, yellow spray paint was used around some shapes for a haloing, softening effect. The piece was finished by machine-sewing the pieces to the background and hemming all the way around.

### Landscape

This piece is also simply my rendering of a landscape theme. Once again, it is the enlargement of a previous successful smaller piece which was 13" x 13"; it was also enlarged to 38" x 40". The identical process was used for this piece as in Matterhorn. Areas of violet spray paint as well as yellow were used for effects in Landscape. It

was sewn together and finished in the same manner as the previous one. Both the Matterhorn and Landscape were developed simultaneously. Matterhorn is listed first here because its theme deals with a specific location visited during my European trip mentioned in the discussion of the preceding piece, Last of Pompeii.

### Looking Glass

Looking Glass, and the next three pieces, represent various autobiographical aspects. Looking Glass is about a pair of green-tinted glasses I had worn for two years. I chose printed fabrics for the first time in my work, in shades of green, and in addition, various shapes were cut from green and orange satin. The shapes were arbitrarily arranged on a background 18" x 18" until a satisfactory composition was decided upon. A thin, almost transparent, layer of light green chiffon was placed on top of the shapes which allowed the prints and colors to show through. This created the effect of looking through green-tinted glasses. Instead of ending with the overall muted effect created by the chiffon, I introduced a triangle of orange satin which attached only at the top and comes out from a slit cut in the chiffon. Looking Glass is the first piece in the investigation which I quilted. After pinning all the shapes down, I backed it with quilt batting and a layer of plain canvas. I machine-sewed through all the layers around the edges of

the shapes with green and orange thread. To give the piece a finished appearance, a one inch border of green satin was sewn around the edges. Its intensity of color reflects the orange satin triangle within the square. No paint or other surface alteration was used on this piece.

### Summer

This piece is also 18" x 18". It has a landscape feeling and has incorporated into it fabrics from clothes I had made for myself. The fabrics used for the piece include satin, prints, solid cottons, and velvet. The colors are pink, green, deep red, yellow, with a yellow satin border. The process used is almost identical to that of Looking Glass. Three differences are the use of yellow spray paint, hand-stitching with embroidery thread around a flower shape, and there is no thin layer of fabric covering the shapes. Otherwise, it was quilted and finished in the same manner.

### February 20, 1976

The title of this piece is the date of my wedding day. Its size is 18" x 18", and contains fabric and lace from my wedding dress which I made myself, as well as velvet, satin, corduroy, and a thin, translucent printed fabric. The design in the printed fabrics helped suggest the shapes used, and they are similar to the shapes in Looking Glass. The colors are warm brown, beige, light orange and green with a gold satin border. Orange spray paint was used in three areas,

and the piece was quilted and finished with a satin border as in the previous two pieces.

### Triangle-Scape

This 18" x 18" piece also incorporates a favorite printed fabric from a garment made for myself. It has a small green flower print and also used are dark red, beige, and dark green velvet and light green, gold and orange satin. The shapes were arranged in the landscape design with orange spray paint used across the top portion. In this piece, for the first time the machine-stitching is used for decorative effects as well as utilitarian needs in the quilting process. Triangle-Scape was finished with a light green satin border. The borders suggest a more finished or concluded statement and are used in much of my work.

### Baby Quilt

When compiling the list of possible themes for this series of pieces, the baby quilt of the past was one choice; and I began this piece with that idea in mind. I made a series of very small squares which represented landscapes and interiors as a child would see them. Sixteen squares of 8" x 8" were executed with a large variety of fabrics and colors. Each individual square was quilted with complementary and contrasting colors of threads. To join the finished squares into one large piece, strips of ivory-colored satin were sewn between the pieces which were

arranged four squares across and four down. No paint at all was used, and it was finished with a light blue satin border. The completed piece is 36" x 36".

### Crazy Quilt

The theme for this piece is also traditional. The crazy quilts of the past were made from odd shapes and scraps of fabric left over from other sewing projects. The scraps were then arranged in a design within a standard size block, then joined to as many other similar blocks as were needed for the size of quilt desired. For my Crazy Quilt I chose to work only with primary colors and to create a personal expression of the crazy quilt idea. I began this piece by painting loose, free shapes with red, yellow, and blue acrylics on a large section of unprimed canvas. After studying the results, I cut three 15" x 15" squares from the painted areas which I found most interesting. I then arranged 15" x 15" squares of satin in the following order: top row--light blue, yellow, light blue; second row--red, dark blue, red; third row-- the three painted canvas squares; bottom row--light blue, yellow, light blue. The squares were all sewn together into one large piece. I then cut several odd shapes of fabric which I used as stencils, arranging them in arbitrary positions and spraying around them with red, blue, and yellow paint on the satin squares of the piece. The quilting process was next, and I machine-stitched the layers together by outlining the sprayed shapes in

matching colors of thread. For instance, a red sprayed shape was sewn with red thread, and so on. The painted shapes on canvas were also stitched in this manner. The entire piece was finished with a red satin border, and the completed size was 44" x 60".

### Flower Bed

I began this piece with the previous one in mind, but it took quite a different turn. I chose pastel colors of satin--yellow, light blue, medium blue, pink, and lavender--which were cut into seventeen 12" x 12" squares. I then selected a favorite print fabric with compatible colors and a bold flower design. Three 12" x 12" squares were cut from this fabric. I then joined the squares into one large piece of four rows of five squares. The printed fabric was in the center area of the piece. For the next step, I cut out the large flower portions in the printed design from another piece of the same fabric used in the squares. Using these as stencils, I arranged them on the satin squares in a pattern like that of the printed design and sprayed around them with yellow paint. The entire piece was then placed on top of a layer of quilt batting, backed by muslin. The silhouettes were then embroidered through all layers with a running stitch of threads in the same pastel colors. This was the first extensive use of hand-stitching in this series, and it was very time consuming. The piece was finished with

a border of the printed fabric, and its completed size was 47" x 60".

### Triptych-Landscape

This piece consists of three 16 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 16 $\frac{1}{2}$ " squares which represent landscapes, related to each other by color and types of fabric used. The colors used were orange, pink, blue, yellow, and red. Satin, velvet, textured cotton, and thin, semi-transparent fabrics were incorporated. Yellow and orange spray paint were used to create similar visual effects as in previous pieces. The three pieces were machine-quilted by sewing along the edges of the shapes and finished with blue satin borders. Triptych-Landscape was kept as three separate squares for a variety of format within the project.

### Lone-Star Quilt

This 41" x 41" piece began with a central orange satin 24" square and was surrounded by alternating blue, orange, and green satin squares. Going back to a variation of a traditional quilt theme, the star pattern, I created a large star on the center area by spraying around a triangular shape of fabric to create an eight-point star. Radiating from the center edges, triangles were sprayed with alternating blue and orange paint onto the bordering squares, creating a distinctive pattern of pointed shapes. The entire piece was machine-quilted by stitching around the



sprayed design with threads matching the satin. Instead of attaching a border to this piece, I simply turned under the edges of the outer squares and sewed them down through all thicknesses for finishing. This piece was the least complex of the project. Only satin, three colors, and the repetition of the same shape make up the completed piece.

### Paper Pieces #1-8

The process used for all of the paper pieces was identical, so it will be described only once in this discussion, and only one piece will be discussed in detail.

The landscape as a theme had been predominant in my previous paper pieces and was chosen as the theme for this series. Because of the limitations of the sewing machine when working with paper, a size restriction was necessary. Two of the pieces are 19" x 19", and the remainder are 12" x 12" squares. The paper used for background, upon which shapes of other papers are sewn, was pastel paper of dark blue and ivory or beige. Each piece consists of shapes cut or torn from pastel paper, book paper of four different colors and patterns, colored paper, velour paper, and tissue paper. The shapes were sewn to the background in the same manner as in the fabric pieces with matching and contrasting threads. Rather than using spray paint for added effects as in the fabric pieces, pastels and colored pencils were used for softening and adding highlights.

As an example, Paper Piece #1 was begun with a dark blue pastel paper, size 19" x 19". A large shape of book paper with a blue overall design on white was torn along one edge and kept straight on the other edge. Another shape was torn from book paper of red, gold, and white design and placed under the torn edge of the other book paper so that only a small amount of it was visible. These shapes were then sewn to the background. Next two similar oblong shapes were torn from the red book paper, and the same dark blue pastel paper was used for the background. The blue shape was placed in the center of the blue and white book paper area, and the red shape was positioned in the large area of dark blue in the upper portion of the picture. Shapes of red tissue paper, basically rectangular, were torn and laid upon the oblong shapes. By sewing around these shapes and along the edges of the tissue paper, a subtle transition of color and pattern were achieved. Contrasting colors of thread were used to help make these areas the focal points of the composition. The drawing was finished with the use of colored pencils along torn edges for added details, and an ivory pastel was worked into areas of the background for softening atmospheric effects.

## CHAPTER III

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Discovering and investigating the possibilities of a combination of techniques was the purpose of this project. The approach to the pieces was spontaneous, but with the specific questions originally proposed as a foundation for the investigation. In conclusion, these questions were answered individually, as follows:

1. Are there traditional designs or techniques in quilts of the past that can be utilized in my own work?

With the fabric pieces Baby Quilt, Crazy Quilt, and Lone-Star Quilt, traditional quilt designs or themes were the direct source. Without actually copying a design, an aspect of it was chosen which inspired my own interpretation of the design. Even with the fabric pieces where there is no direct link to a traditional design, there is a connection to quilts of the past. Where I have chosen auto-biographical and personal themes, there is a similarity to album or story-telling quilts. Whether directly or indirectly using the traditional quilt design as a source of inspiration in my own work, this is a limitless background for ideas for future work.

The traditional technique of hand quilting was used in only one of the fabric pieces, Flower Bed. Hand-made quilts

of the past could take a year or more for the completion of one quilt. Although the hand-quilting in Flower Bed is quite successful, the impracticality of executing all pieces in this manner is quite staggering. It is felt that the machine-quilting process is most expedient and does not destroy any aspect of the completed piece. Another traditional technique which I feel enhances the fabric pieces is the choice of fabrics from scraps of garments I have made and worn myself. In the past, there was rarely a case of a woman being able to buy fabrics for the sole purpose of making a quilt. A long process of saving every scrap of available fabrics took place before a quilt could be made. This made the finished quilt an even more prized possession with recollections and memories held for each different fabric used. Use of this technique in my work gives it a personal feeling and meaning which I have strived for, whether or not a particular choice of fabric has any special meaning to the viewer.

2. Are the primary colors (red, yellow, blue) in manufactured unaltered fabric more effective than painted or altered fabric?

In the case of satin, the brilliancy of the colors red, yellow, and blue cannot be matched by painted fabric. The use of paint on satin changes its characteristics entirely. The surface texture is transformed from a glossy, smooth, wet look to dry and dull. While the primary colors are used

to some extent in most of the pieces, the point is best illustrated in Crazy Quilt where only primary colors were used. On the sections of satin squares where shapes were sprayed around with canned spray paint, the colors are dulled by the paint. The intensity of the satin tends to mute the color of the spray paint. The use of paint is more for the creation of shapes than the aspects of color. On the section of canvas squares where the primary colors were brushed on with acrylics, there again is a contrast. The acrylic-painted areas are very flat and dulled next to the satin, and again they function more as shapes than color.

The primary colors in other manufactured fabrics such as velvet or cotton, although not as brilliant as satin, are still preferable to painted fabric in my work. Rather than for color, my use of paint is best for the suggestion of shapes or a softening effect in certain areas. In many instances, the use of painted fabric would be inappropriate for the desired results.

3. Is there a correlation between the color and imagery in the paper pieces and those of the fabric pieces?

The imagery in the paper pieces--the landscape theme--is used also in the fabric pieces Last of Pompeii, Matterhorn, Landscape, Summer, Triangle-Scape, Baby Quilt, and Triptych-Landscape. The use of this imagery can also be traced to previous paper pieces, as well as fabric pieces done before the beginning of this project.

The spontaneity of process for the paper pieces is the same as for the fabric pieces. A personal preference for certain colors is reflected in all the pieces. In the two larger pieces red, blue, and white predominate. In the six smaller pieces the colors are generally warm-brown, yellow, and orange. These color schemes can also be found throughout the fabric pieces.

As stated in the discussion, pastels and colored pencils were used in the paper pieces for the same effects attained by the use of spray paint in the fabric pieces. Thus, this is another connection between the two types of pieces.

4. Of the project pieces, is there a size that generally appears to be more successful than others?

Except for the piece Triptych-Landscape, in which three 16½" squares combine for a single piece, the larger pieces are more successful. In the four 18" x 18" pieces--Looking Glass; Summer; February 20, 1976; and Triangle-Scape--the size seems to give a decorative, almost pillow-like appearance to the pieces which detracts from the desired effect of a small fabric painting. Hanging these four pieces side-by-side as a group, however, compensates somewhat for the undesirable qualities. In the larger pieces, especially Baby Quilt, the combination of several small squares into one larger piece is very successful. Also, Matterhorn and Landscape, which were enlarged from a smaller piece, are more successful as a single piece than the smaller ones are alone.

The range of sizes possible in the paper pieces is limited because of the sewing machine. These limits do not seem to effect the success of these pieces however. Contrary to the fabric pieces, the smallness of the paper pieces does not lend a decorative quality, and the pieces are successful individually.

This investigation was valuable for many reasons. I found that the traditional quilt and its meaning to me are indeed an important aspect of my own creative work. A large number of ideas for future pieces was gained by the thoughtful process of record-keeping during the project. For the first time in my work, I found it possible to relate fabric pieces to paper pieces, creating a substantial, cohesive body of work. Perhaps most importantly, I have attained a significant degree of creativity with a highly personal approach to my work.

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